# VIOLENT AND EXPLICIT VIDEO GAMES: INFORMING PARENTS AND PROTECTING CHILDREN

—For Mature Readers Only—

Testimony given on June 14, 2006 by
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It is an honor to testify today. I appear before you as a software reviewer, library trustee, former teacher, and parent of two daughters, ages 11 and 14.

I guess the reason I've ended up here today is because I've played a lot of games (about 7,308 as of yesterday) as editor of a software review publication. I started reviewing software in 1984 on an Apple II, traveling the Oregon Trail, hunting Carmen Sandiego and coloring with *KidPix*. I've killed thousands of bad guys, squished some cops in Grand Theft Auto, and punched myself silly in *Mortal Kombat*. I can hold my own in *DDR*, load a UMD on a PSP; but I still can't beat my youngest daughter in *Hot Wheels Turbo Racing*. I've played tennis with the *Mario Bros.*, skated with *Tony Hawk* and golfed with Tiger Woods. I've filled hot tubs with *Sims* and helped Joan of Arc conquer the Mongols, all in a single weekend.

At the Mediatech Foundation, where I test software, I witnessed two high school students stay awake for 36 hours trying to fly The Spirit of St. Louis across the Atlantic, in a failed attempt to repeat Charles Lindbergh's flight to Paris with *Microsoft Flight Simulator*, using real time weather conditions and modern GPS. Lately I've seen children competing against one other using an innovative wireless networking title, called *Brain Games*, on math facts. Recently, I flew a Harrier jet, using the new PS3 controller, which uses the position and motion of your hands to control the aircraft; and I conducted an orchestra using the Nintendo Wii remote. The first point to take from this testimony–improving technology, driven by Moore's Law, will make the next five years very interesting.

What have I learned, and what does it mean for US families?

• We need to protect our children—but from what? There is little consensus on the short or long-term effects of violent games on human development. Most would agree, however, that normally developing children can distinguish between fantasy and reality. I certainly do. Most parents are taking their cues directly from their individual children, and perhaps that is why they have no problems buying a T rated Star Wars game for their third grader. This is not known issue.

• There may be less obvious things to protect children from, including ethnic and gender stereotyping, hidden commercialism, being left alone for hours and unsupervised use of the Internet. And what about plain, old-fashioned "low quality," which is certainly less newsworthy than "hot coffee." Some games are just poorly designed; a waste of family resources and precious childhood time. Others load your computer with commercial links that can slow a computer to a crawl. There's a growing category of web-based content for sale, such as services for SAT test prep, where you can find typos on the sample tests.

• Software publishing seems to be authorless, and hence blameless, unlike books or movies, where the author and/or director's name is prominently displayed. There should be a way to see who is behind games. You'd be less likely to put racy content in a game, if you knew your mother or children could tell it was you that decided to put it in.

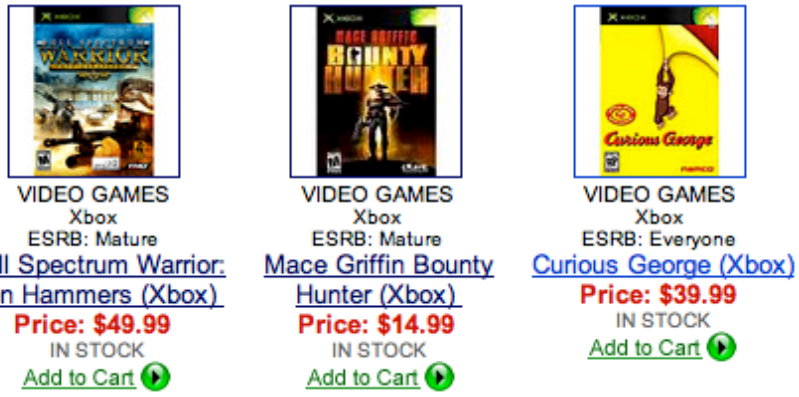
• It is important in this hearing to make the distinction between interactive and non-interactive (linear vs. non-linear) media. Unlike movies, where you can see the beginning through the end, or a book where you see how many pages you have, interactive media is three dimensional, fluid and dynamic. To this end, we need a rating system that can capture the complexity of millions of lines of code, or the inner working of an MMOG (Massively Multiplayer Online Game). The ESRB system lets the people who know their content the best—the publishers—take responsibility for disclosing what is in the product. There is no better way to do this.

• With more platforms comes more consumer confusion. A single movie, such as Disney/Pixar *Cars*, will generate nine video games, which are different for each platform. These differences should be better defined for the consumer.

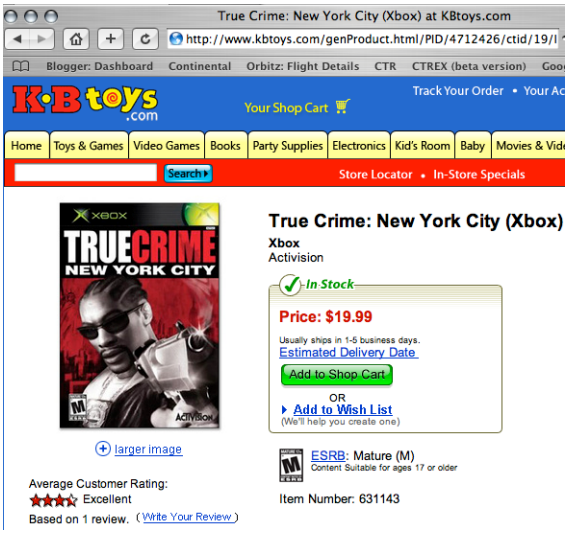
• As hardware improves over time, more interactive options will seep into the lives of children. It will become increasingly harder to define a "video game" vs."software" vs.

"TV toy" vs. "mobile phone" It helps to turn the question around and look at it through the eyes of a child, at all developmental levels. What quality interactive options does a child have to explore, at any given time? Is there quality? Is there balance?

• We have found the ESRB rating system to be both necessary and reliable. We, and the parenting magazines we work with, have come to count on the ESRB to tell us if a title is appropriate for a certain age range and if the type of content might be inappropriate. The validity of the ratings (or the way they are interpreted), however, is less solid. Some parents and retailers don't seem to mind M rated games when they probably should, and the descriptors tend to be overlooked. Mature-rated games are easy to find in toy stores.




*Why do toy stores mix M rated games with obvious children's content? Why are there no descriptors online? (Both screens, from [www.kbtoys.com](http://www.kbtoys.com) captured on June 12, 2006)*



• We have found the ESRB staff to be responsive to our questions.
• Video games are no longer just for kids. Increasingly, more titles will be designed for older audiences, and the ratings will reflect this. But it is important to remember (and less newsworthy) that 85% of the current 11,937 games have no worrisome content, and many have positive educational outcomes.
• There's a new kind of digital divide to consider. Participation in the video game culture can be expensive. The best quality online activities cost $10 per month, and games cost $50 each. Kids without the money and access to expensive game systems are being left out. There are new faces to the digital divide.

Trustworthy consumer information, such as that provided by the current ESRB rating system, is the foundation for the development of interactive publishing, and for higher quality use by families. The biggest challenge we face now is to help consumers use the existing descriptors, and to continue to study the effects of interactive media in light of the next generation of connected consoles and HDTVs. As researchers, we should raise the level of dialog by citing references and trying games ourselves first hand, observing real kids and grounding opinions with firm data. There has never been a better time to pick up a controller and to play along with a child.